

James McWha citation

Thursday 4th of May 2017
11:00am – Faculty of Sciences

Chancellor, it gives me great pleasure to present to you James Alexander McWha (pronounced: McWAW).

The Degree of Doctor of the University, DUniv (honoris causa), is being awarded to Emeritus Professor James McWha to acknowledge his exceptionally distinguished service to the University of Adelaide – as Vice-Chancellor for 10 years – and for his leadership, passion and commitment to higher education globally.

James Alexander McWha was born in County Down, Northern Ireland. A gifted school student, he was given the opportunity to attend Queen's University Belfast thanks to a Gibson Scholarship. The scholarship was valued at 200 pounds a year – a small sum by today's standards, but for a boy from rural Northern Ireland in the 1960s, it was a enough to support him throughout his undergraduate studies.

The ability to transform lives through the power of scholarship was something that resonated deeply with James, and he would never forget this throughout the rest of his career.

James went on to graduate with a Bachelor of Science in 1969, and a Bachelor of Agriculture (with Honours in Agricultural Botany) in 1970. He received his PhD from Glasgow University in 1973.

Thus began an impressive academic career in the field of plant physiology. He was appointed Lecturer and then Senior Lecturer at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, in 1973; and in 1980 he became Head of Department.

In 1985, he returned to Belfast as Professor and Head of Agricultural Botany at his alma mater, Queen's University; and this came with a joint appointment, as Deputy Chief Scientific Officer at Northern Ireland's Department of Agriculture.

1988 saw James return to his now beloved New Zealand as Director of the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (Fruit and Trees), based in Palmerston. Four years later, he was appointed CEO of the Horticulture and Food Research Institute of New Zealand.

Throughout his academic career, James had been making a significant impact on the field of plant physiology, through published papers and conferences. He was keenly focused on both quality research and the importance of outcomes for industry.

His success in research administration led to James being appointed Vice-Chancellor and President of Massey University in New Zealand – held until 2002, when he was appointed the 19th Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of Adelaide.

You could say that James's impact on our University was almost immediate. Partly because, when he first visited us here on North Terrace, he completely missed the campus and kept on walking! In those days, the University lacked any significant signage to the outside community, and the campus was walled by high fences. James promptly set out to make sure the University of Adelaide opened itself up to the people of Adelaide, becoming part of the community, rather than apart from it.

James's tenure was one of great rejuvenation for the University. Under his leadership, the number of students more than doubled and our campuses enjoyed significant infrastructure

growth – with more than \$400 million investment in state-of-the-art facilities over just a four-year period.

James steered our University to a strong financial position, attracting record levels of research funding and building closer ties with government, industry and the wider community.

In 2011, James's genuine compassion for students shone through when the University of Canterbury was hit hard by the Christchurch earthquakes he arranged for a free semester of study for 170 University of Canterbury students. This earned him a formal vote of thanks from both the Australian and New Zealand Prime Ministers of the time, Julia Gillard and John Key.

In 2012, the year he retired from the University of Adelaide, James was awarded an Officer of the Order of Australia (AO) for his services to higher education.

Ever since that year, the University of Adelaide has presented an annual James McWha Award of Excellence for outstanding alumni.

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